

Assistant Secretary Robert Blake
Interview with Mir Ayoob Ali Khan, Special Affairs Editor
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Q: I would like to start with the latest declaration of President Obama regarding Afghanistan -- on bringing in more troops, setting a deadline for withdrawal. This sounds a bit complicated given the history of Afghanistan. So would you mind explaining how it is going to work out? One more thing, if you give a deadline to your enemy, wouldn't the enemy lie low until you leave and then reassert itself? In a situation like that, do you keep your plans secret and do what you want over a period of time?

Assistant Secretary Blake: I'd like to answer that in two ways. First of all with respect to the overall strategy, the President has set the goal of defeating and dismantling al-Qaeda so they are no longer able to pose a threat to the security of the United States and to other countries. He has proposed that in order to achieve that objective we have to carry out a multi-pronged strategy. Part of that is on the military side, to increase the number of troops by 30,000. The purpose of that is really two-fold. First, to facilitate the training of Afghan forces so that we can accelerate the transition by which they begin to take responsibility for their own security. The second purpose is to provide enhanced security in major urban areas of Afghanistan to help protect the population.

One of the things we've learned in counterinsurgency places like Iraq is military success will not come unless you gain the trust of the people and the support of the people, and so security is part of it but the other very important part of it is to improve governance and to improve the ability of the government to deliver services and deliver opportunities for the people.

That's why you've seen President Obama also announce a parallel increase in the number of civilians, American civilians who are going into Afghanistan. They are going in primarily to help with the agricultural sector which we see as a very important way to provide new economic opportunities, new livelihoods for the people of Afghanistan, but also as a way to hopefully encourage many of the Taliban to both stop fighting for the Taliban and become farmers again, but also for farmers to stop growing opium and poppies and again grow the traditional crops that Afghanistan has always been known for.

The other part of the integrated strategy is that to succeed in Afghanistan we also must have cooperation in Pakistan, specifically to eliminate the sanctuaries and safe havens from which al-Qaeda and its allies are operating inside Pakistan.

Now with respect to your question about whether it is wise to set a deadline, I think there's been some misunderstanding about the date that the President announced of June of 2011. The President said quite clearly that that would be the beginning of the withdrawal of American troops. But the pace and the scope of the withdrawal will very much be determined by conditions on the ground. That means that if the training effort is not going as well as we had hoped, or if the Taliban for reasons that we can't predict actually improve their strength, then of course we'll have to stay longer and the pace of our withdrawal will have to be slower.

I think the other point that the President and Secretary Gates and Secretary Clinton consistently have made is that even if we begin a withdrawal of troops, we will have a much longer term economic engagement in terms of support for the Afghan government so that it can again provide for the needs of its people and lay the basis

for long term growth and conditions where Afghan men won't have the inclination or the incentive to join the Taliban.

So this is a very long term partnership that we are developing now with Afghanistan.

Q: I have been to Afghanistan when Najibullah's government fell and the Mujahadeen took over. I felt at that point of time that the U.S. should not have abandoned Afghanistan, it is the time that you let go Afghanistan and let things develop on their own. The gap of about six-seven years created huge problems there. We felt at that point in time if you had taken interest as you are talking about today, the economic growth and re-building of Afghanistan things would not have been this bad?

Assistant Secretary Blake: I agree with you. I think the President made that very clear throughout the course of the presidential campaign, the last campaign, that we should not have taken our eyes off the Afghanistan priorities and that it was a mistake to assign as much priority as President Bush did to Iraq when the real threats to America were in Afghanistan.

Q: Now, you have started talking in softer language about the Taliban and President Obama's speech also says that the Karzai government can start negotiating with them. Al Qaeda and Taliban. Al Qaeda as perceived by a lot of people is still an abstract ideology or force around which people are gathering, whereas the Taliban is a reality, but you are targeting the abstract force but not the reality. Would you please explain?

Assistant Secretary Blake: We think that with respect to the Taliban there are important opportunities to encourage substantial numbers of Taliban to abandon the fighting, renounce violence, and again, take on agricultural and other occupations. We'll only be able to do that if first we can encourage the government of President Karzai to be less corrupt so that people feel that they have a stake in their government. But also we can help the government of President Karzai to extend the ability of the government to provide basic services to the Afghan people, be it health services, education, and more broadly, economic opportunities for the people.

It is our judgment that many of the people who work in the Taliban, who fight for the Taliban are really just opportunistic people who are really not fighting because of any ideological conviction, but more because the Taliban are paying them better than what they might be able to earn as farmers. So if we can help the government provide better opportunities, we can successfully encourage a lot of those people to give up the fighting.

I don't think we have any illusions that it's going to be difficult to encourage all of the Taliban to give up the fighting because there are certainly some senior leaders like Mullah Omar who probably will continue to fight no matter what. Those people will simply have to be dealt with. So there always has to be a military component to this. That's why we do believe that reintegration is a very important part of the overall counterinsurgency equation.

Q: Reintegration of the Taliban.

Assistant Secretary Blake: Yes. Another part that we always like to stress is that this is something that will be led by the Karzai government. This is not something that will be led by the United States. It will be something that the Karzai government does in very close cooperation with local tribal leaders. They have to be in the lead on this to be able to convince the Taliban in their own tribes, in their own areas to give up their arms and again, take up farming and other occupations.

Q: We in India have developed a solidly negative opinion about the Taliban and we believe that this strategy might not work. If the Taliban succeed in capturing the government in Pakistan then India would have real problems, as we have seen the Taliban in Punjab as they have moved over from Afghanistan to Swat and to Punjab -- this is like spreading fire. So how do you look at that danger? Is it real or are we only perceiving it as a danger because we are Indians?

Assistant Secretary Blake: I think there is some danger. When you talk about the Taliban there are different Taliban. There's the Pakistan Taliban. We believe that they are a significant threat. It's our judgment that the government of Pakistan has made important progress in dealing with the Pakistan Taliban, the TTP, through the campaigns in Swat and South Waziristan. But we also believe that it is very important for the government of Pakistan now to take concerted action against the Afghan Taliban and the other members of al Qaeda who are based in north Waziristan as well as the groups based in Quetta, the so-called Quetta Shura. They are the ones that are threatening our troops in Afghanistan, and also threatening Indian contractors and others who are working in Afghanistan.

So Pakistan is making good progress, but an integral part of completing the challenge will be to continue to make progress in Waziristan and Quetta.

Q: Pakistan tackling the Taliban has led to serious problems in Pakistan itself because they were the ones who encouraged, entered into an agreement, encouraged the coalition and now they have turned the guns on them and it has created problems within the society, because society has radicalized in Pakistan. I am talking more about Pakistan as it is very important to us, so it affects India as much as it affects U.S.

Assistant Secretary Blake: They have. We agree, and that's why we have significantly enhanced our assistance and our partnership with Pakistan. We feel that Pakistan is now confronting challenges on many different fronts. First on the security front, a striking increase in the incidents of terrorism inside Pakistan. But also on the economic front, on the energy front, there are quite significant energy shortages in many parts of Pakistan.

So all of these are areas in which United States and other members of the international community need to help Pakistan. And that's why we increased our civilian assistance quite substantially. We are now giving 1.5 billion dollars a year in civilian assistance to Pakistan to help that country to provide better education, better health care, and more economic opportunities for its people to again underline the kind of radicalism that you were talking about.

The bombings have also perhaps, unfortunately for militants, set off the reverse effect of increasing the support of the people for the government's efforts to fight terrorism, and we've been very pleased to see that there's

been strong popular support in Swat and in South Waziristan. I think that bodes well for continuing efforts to, again, to confront these militants because that popular support is a necessary element to sustaining those kinds of efforts.

Q: One question that is very important for us, nuclear weapons in Pakistan, how safe are they?

Assistant Secretary Blake: Yes. The President and many other leaders in the United States have repeatedly expressed our confidence in the ability of the Pakistani government to secure its nuclear weapons. That is something that we, like you, follow very closely.

Q: Very closely?

Assistant Secretary Blake: That's all I have to say on that subject. [Laughter].

Q: What would you like to tell the Indian people and government to allay their fears and apprehensions?

Assistant Secretary Blake: I think the most important thing to tell them is that first of all, we are working very closely together to confront the common enemy. Since the terrible bombings that took place and the terrible killings that took place on 26/11 in Mumbai, counterterrorism cooperation between the United States and India has increased very substantially. You saw that Home Minister Chidambaram visited the United States in September of this year and had wide-ranging meetings with all of his counterparts in the United States -- his Secretary-level, Minister-level counterparts in the United States. And one of the most important outcomes of Prime Minister Singh's recent state visit to the United States was a new Memorandum of Understanding on counterterrorism to scale up further our cooperation on counterterrorism.

So we understand the threats that are facing India and we're working very closely with our friends in the Indian government to help you to confront and also to prevent those threats from affecting the security of the Indian people.

Q: I will move to Middle East. You said that President Obama's policy is for discouraging new settlements? How exactly and in what stage are we in the Middle East, because that is the problem which is at the base of all other problems?

Assistant Secretary Blake: Yes. It's one of many problems, significant problems.

I think one of the lessons that the President took from the last administration was that it is very important to begin right away to try to forge peace in the Middle East. So he appointed very early in his administration former Senator George Mitchell to be his Special Envoy to the Middle East. He is working full time on this very critical challenge for us, for Israel and for the Palestinians. And all I can say is that they're making some progress but it's a very difficult time. The Palestinians [are divided] and we're working our way through very difficult issues like the settlements. We were pleased to see the Government of Israel announced recently a freeze on settlements for ten months.

Again, I think there are many challenges here and we have our best people working on this because of the high priority that the President attaches to peace in the Middle East.

Q: My last question, about Iran. We have been cooperating with the United States on Iran, which is seeing ourselves distancing from Iran. How do you take it? What is your expectation?

Assistant Secretary Blake: Again, as you said, President Obama decided that it was very important to try to extend a hand of friendship to the people of Iran and he's done that through a variety of mechanisms. We had some bilateral messages that were sent through various channels, but he also decided that the United States should work with the P5+1, the permanent five members of the Security Council plus Germany, to support an offer by the IAEA to test the assertion of the Iranian government that their nuclear program is for peaceful purposes and they're not developing nuclear weapons. So they decided to test that through an agreement whereby the Iranians would agree to transfer a large amount of nuclear fuel outside of the country, for reprocessing outside of the country, and they would also grant access to the previously undisclosed sites, nuclear sites, in Qom so the IAEA could determine what the purpose of that facility was. And third, they agreed that Iran would continue to meet with the P5+1 on these issues.

Thus far, Iran has not fully met any one of those conditions that it agreed to. As a result, the President has begun to consult with our P5+1 colleagues about ways to toughen sanctions against Iran since it does appear that they have something to hide and that they might well be pursuing a nuclear weapons program.

So I would just say that we appreciate also the strong position that India has taken on this.

Q: Can India play any role in this?

Assistant Secretary Blake: India supported the recent vote in the IAEA and it's taken a principled position against the Iranian nuclear weapons program. So we look forward to continuing to work closely with India on this important matter because of course if Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons that would destabilize the entire region, including India. So it's in none of our interests to allow that to happen.

Thank you very much.